Universities New Zealand submission to the Ministry of Education on Student Voice

This submission reflects the views of the Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors' Academic, and the Directors of Student Services of all eight universities.

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Introduction

The Ministry of Education's survey on Student Voice (page 2) starts with some assertions regarding the importance of student voice as part of a well-functioning tertiary education system. The key ones are:

- *"**Students** …Student voice is an important channel for students to hold their organisations to account. Exercising student voice allows students to advocate for their rights as students and raise issues they experience.*

- ***Organisations** (including staff) benefit from incorporating student voice into their teaching practices, services, and quality assurance and enhancement processes. This is because it enables them to refine their practices and deliver an education that meets their students' needs and aspirations."*

Universities New Zealand—Te Pōkai Tara (UNZ) broadly agrees with the assertion in the bullet point 'Students' but only partially supports the assertions within the 'Organisations' statement.

UNZ is concerned that the survey does not encourage respondents to unpick what goals and objectives are envisaged by giving students a meaningful voice and having it sufficiently heeded. Without doing this, it is difficult to make the case for what a more effective system might look like.

This submission tries to address this by considering, in turn (a) university sector goals and objectives, and (b) where student voice is most useful or necessary in advancing those goals and objectives, while (c) noting that the university sector and individual universities face a range of practical challenges in getting effective student voice.

University sector goals and objectives

New Zealand universities must balance several occasionally competing goals and objectives. These can be self-imposed and/or an expectation of Government as main funder, and/or an expectation of students and/or employers. These goals and objectives include:

1. producing career-ready, employable graduates with qualifications that employers understand and trust, and with skills and knowledge consistently at a standard that employers broadly expect

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2. ensuring that students admitted into university study are, on the face of it, probably capable of completing their academic studies as long as they commit to their studies and organise and apply themselves to a reasonable level

3. providing an appropriate level of academic and non-academic support and feedback to help students successfully complete their qualifications. This support is balanced with the need to produce graduates with the levels of self-organisation and resilience an employer could reasonably expect of any employee who holds a university qualification.

4. maintaining a broader perception that a university's qualification is prestigious and valuable—to help alumni throughout their careers and to help the institution attract new students

5. broadly ensuring most graduates are securing degree-level employment—including by exerting some control on numbers of students admitted into some programmes (e.g. preventing over-supply)

6. offering a mix of qualifications, with curriculum that students see as useful and delivered through teaching that students generally see as being of quality

7. offering a student experience that can be engaging and enjoyable. This includes everything from providing welcoming attractive campus amenities through to ensuring access to off-campus recreation, accommodation and social amenities. It includes providing engaging and enjoyable teaching and learning.

8. conducting research and transferring knowledge

9. being a good employer; providing an appealing work environment and remuneration sufficient to attract and retain academic and non-academic staff

10. managing resources responsibly and ensuring the long-term financial viability of the institution.

Where is student voice most useful in advancing university sector goals & objectives?

Effective student voice is most useful in three areas:

A. Students can provide a student perspective when universities are taking decisions about academic programmes, learner experience and amenities or services provided to students. If they are part of a larger student organisation, they can also seek and reflect back the views of a cross-section of the student body. They can also provide a student perspective within committees/councils where, in most cases, the most recent experience of life as a student is many years in the past. If they are part of a larger body, they can capture and reflect the perspectives of a range of students.

   This is a key reason why universities have always maintained student representation on Councils and Council sub-committees even when this was not a statutory requirement.

B. Students can act in their own interests and those of their peers in advocating for quality in qualifications, teaching and other student services. They can help universities deliver a system that makes it more likely that students (a) are supported to successfully complete their studies, (b) receive quality teaching and learning, and (c) will gain useful qualifications that prepare them for successful lives and careers. Students who are involved in shaping their own learning also typically achieve better learning outcomes.

   For many decades all universities have had a student voice on all relevant university committees—including Academic Boards, sub-committees of Academic Board, disciplinary committees and quality assurance committees. All universities also operate extensive networks of student representatives in all courses.

C. Student voice and engagement contributes to the relationship between the university and students. Student representatives can communicate with the wider student body and provide assurances that the system is listening to them and responding to their needs. Key university staff have a conduit to student leaders they can communicate and work with to improve mutual understanding.

Universities have preferred to source student representatives through students' associations wherever possible because of this

Practical challenges to effective student voice

Universities see these channels for giving students a voice as important; however some key challenges and realities undermine the way that voice is included and the extent to which it can be effectively representative. These include:

a. Few student representatives serve on committees/Councils for more than one year at a time, so a disproportionate amount of their time is spent just trying to understand what is going on and to learn how things work. Where student representatives manage more than one year, the quality and usefulness of their contribution is typically much greater.

b. Student members of institution-level committees (Council, Disciplinary Committee, etc) often come through democratic processes such as Students Association elections. This has the virtue that these student representatives can claim to speak for (and with) part or all of the student body. However, it does not always guarantee they will have the skills or experience to contribute effectively in all the committees and bodies they end up being appointed to.

c. Even where student representatives come through a democratic process, they often cannot claim to represent the whole student body. Only a relatively small proportion of students vote in student elections and not all votes cast are for whoever ends up elected. The student body is enormously diverse.

d. At tertiary institutions where there is little training and support, student representatives can find participating in university committees or councils (where they are usually the youngest and least experienced person in the room) extremely intimidating. This can manifest in behaviours such as withdrawing, and/or being overly reliant on rehearsed/written positions. Committee chairs can exacerbate this problem when they don't understand how to make participation a less intimidating experience. Committee chairs can mitigate this by actively engaging and soliciting feedback from student representatives and by ensuring students have adequate mentoring and training to support their transition into the role.

e. Students are not unified in their views around how they want to work collectively. For example, nationally, NZUSA represents the students' associations of only four universities plus one campus of Massey University. At individual universities, the local Māori students' association or international students' associations, or postgraduate students' association frequently claim that the main students' association cannot and does not speak for them. This poses a real risk of 'fragmenting' the student voice on matters that may affect all students.

Recommendations

Universities see meaningful student voice as both important and valuable, but it must operate in ways that reflect both the practical challenges and realities, and the sometimes-competing goals and objectives of a university to its various stakeholders. An authentic relationship with students is important, but it cannot undermine the fact that the university is ultimately accountable for the overall experience and education provided to all students.

With all the above in mind, UNZ sees the following opportunities to potentially enhance meaningful student voice in the New Zealand tertiary education system.

1. Good practice and upskilling—though all universities provide training and support for students who take on representative roles, we know that that this varies between institutions. We think there could be benefit in having one organisation nationally responsible for developing good-practice guidance and providing training or support where students cannot get this to an adequate level at their home institutions. This could include:

   a. training and support for students taking on representative roles at whole-of-sector or whole-of-institution level (for example, on the university sector's Committee for University Academic Programmes, or on an individual university's council, or disciplinary committee). This might involve learning about meeting protocols and requirements, for example.

   b. making good-practice guidance and training available to help committees and committee chairs understand how best to seek and benefit from student voice

   c. providing good-practice guidance and training for students' associations and other bodies that provide support networks of student representatives.

2. One national student body that:

   a. can act on behalf of all other national student bodies and the main university students' associations when there is a requirement to appoint and support one or two student members to national committees, reviews or other processes requiring meaningful student voice. NZUSA currently does this via Memorandums of Understanding with organisations like Te Mana Ākonga—the National Māori Student Tertiary Students' Association and it seems to work well.

   b. has the resourcing to support student representatives with advice, coordination, and the development of evidence and analysis where students need to respond to national or regional issues.

   c. has the resourcing to provide logistical support (travel, accommodation, per diems, etc) to student representatives where required to ensure the best representation possible on national committees, reviews, etc

   d. can appoint student representatives to key national committees for periods of at least two years.

   Note: we are not saying that there should be just one student body nationally. We see significant merit in a diverse range of organisations that can meet the needs of the diverse groups of students that exist across the tertiary education system.

3. Look to international exemplars of how the issues around 'sustainability' (ie, the churn of student representatives) might be best addressed, supported and resourced.

4. Encourage students to see the value in taking on representative roles—for example in improving their own employability. This could be done as part of the orientation process when students are often provided with a range of advice on ways to get the most from their university experience.